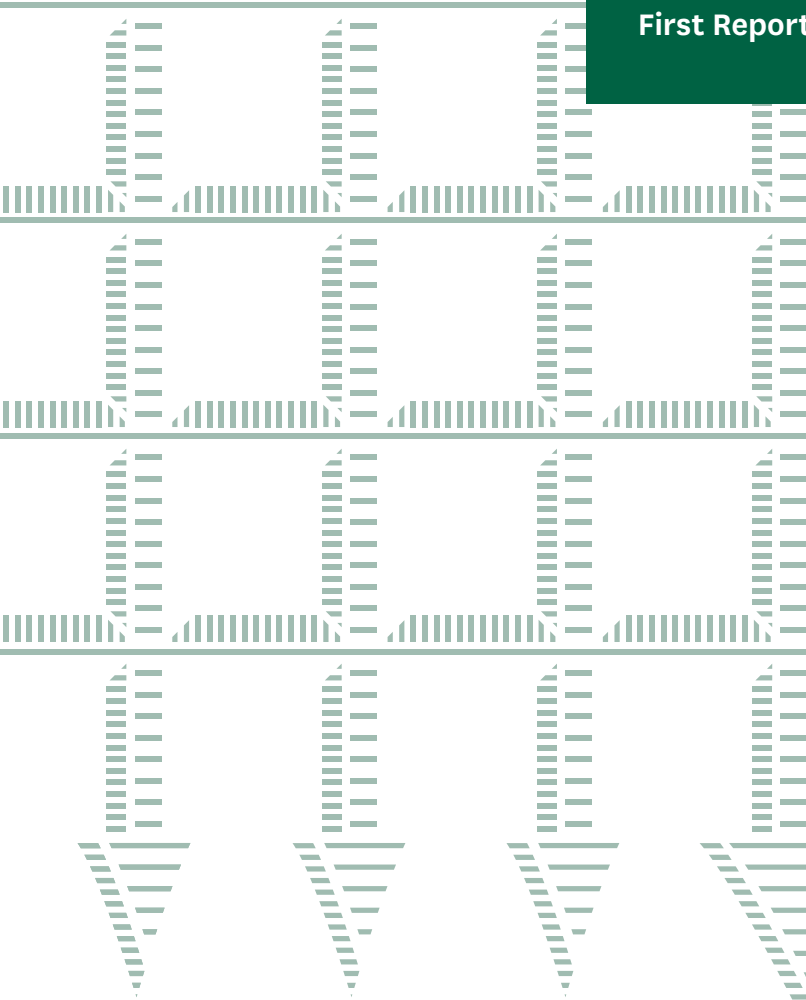


Procedure Committee

Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2023–24

First Report of Session 2024–25

HC 461



Procedure Committee

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1 Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2023–24

1. Members value written parliamentary questions as a means of gathering and scrutinising information from the Government. Since the 2010 Parliament, successive Procedure Committees have assumed a role in monitoring answering bodies' performance in responding to written questions and, importantly, have held departments to account where performance has been inadequate. In this Report, we continue the work of our predecessors and publish data on answering performance of departments during the 2023–24 Session, the last Session of the 2019 Parliament. We also set out our expectations for departments and our intention to continue the work of our predecessors by monitoring answering performance over the course of this Parliament.

Timeliness of responses: Overall performance in the 2023–24 Session

2. Our predecessor committees across several Parliaments have set the acceptable level of performance for answering bodies of a minimum of 85% of written answers to be provided 'on time'.¹ Responses are deemed to have been provided 'on time' for Ordinary questions if they are provided within five working days of being tabled, and for Named Day questions if answers are provided by the specified date. We agree with our predecessor committees that answering bodies should be held to this 85% standard, and will continue to scrutinise departments' performance against that performance standard.

¹ See [Letter from the Chair of the Procedure Committee to the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice](#), dated 13 June 2019 and Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2023–24, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23](#), HC 676, para 3

3. In the last Parliament, our predecessor committee expressed disappointment as to how long it was taking for overall answering performance to recover from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on departments' capacity to provide answers within the expected timeframe.² We are therefore pleased to report that answering performance in the 2023–24 Session rose to the highest level since before the pandemic, with the 85% standard having been exceeded for both Ordinary and Named Day responses for the first time since the 2017–19 Session. Moreover, 19 of the 23 answering bodies met the 85% standard for Ordinary questions and 17 of the 23 answering bodies met the 85% standard for Named Day questions. We note that, overall, departments continue to respond to a greater proportion of Ordinary questions on time relative to those tabled for response on a Named Day. It is therefore commendable that a number of 'middle volume' answering bodies (i.e. those with a non-negligible volume of questions and a good response rate) performed strongly across all written questions. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Transport, which both received over 1,000 Ordinary questions and over 500 Named Day questions during the last Session, each responded to 99% of Ordinary questions on time, and 98% and 99% of Named Day questions on time respectively.

Table 1: Overall rates of timeliness in written answers from Government departments, Sessions 2010–12 to 2023–24

Session	Ordinary written	Named Day
2010–12	69%	69%
2012–13	76%	73%
2013–2014	85%	78%
2014–2015	87%	81%
2015–2016	92%	86%
2016–2017	92%	87%
2017–2019	92%	89%
2019	91%	85%
2019–21	79%	74%
2021–22	85%	79%
2022–23	88%	82%
2023–24	92%	88%

Source: 2010–12 to 2014–15: memorandum from the Leader of the House of Commons, November 2015; 2015–16 to 2024: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

² Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2022–23, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2021–22](#), HC 385, para 3 and Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2023–24, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23](#), HC 676, para 3

4. Whilst overall answering performance showed good improvement on the figures for the 2022–23 Session, it is notable that this improvement coincided with a marked decrease in the number of questions being tabled per sitting day. The average number of written questions tabled across all answering bodies per sitting day during the 2023–24 Session was 274, down from 346 per day in the 2022–23 Session: a 21% decrease.

Table 2: Number of questions tabled to all answering bodies per sitting day, Session 2010–12 to 2023–24

Session	Number of sitting days	WPQs per sitting day
2010–12	295	333
2012–13	145	299
2013–2014	162	260
2014–2015	134	226
2015–2016	158	237
2016–2017	142	249
2017–2019	349	282
2019	15	231
2017–19 + 2019	364	279
2019–21	209	331
2021–22	149	334
2022–23	213	346
2023–24	101	274

Source: 2010–12 to 2014–15: memorandum from the Leader of the House of Commons, November 2015; 2015–16 to 2024: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

5. Against this drop in the volume of written questions tabled, many answering bodies improved their performance; however, data for individual departments shows some variation from this broader trend. For instance, despite the slight decrease in the volume of written parliamentary questions it received for answer (on average 24.4 per sitting day in 2023–24, down from an average of 27 per day in 2022–23), the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s performance decreased from the previous Session. In the 2023–24 Session it responded to 78% of Ordinary written questions on time and 73% of Named Day questions on time, down from 84% and 81% respectively in the 2022–23 Session. Unlike other departments, the Ministry of Defence saw an increase in the number of questions tabled for answer in the 2023–24 Session, up from an average of 25.1 questions per day during the 2022–23 Session to an average of 35.6 questions per day in 2023–24, but this increase corresponded with a slight decline in its performance. Having

surpassed the 85% standard for both Ordinary and Named Day questions in 2022–23, in the 2023–24 Session, the Ministry of Defence responded to 86% of Ordinary questions on time and 80% of Named Day questions on time.

6. We have seen in previous Sessions that a significant increase in the daily volume of written questions can sometimes lead to a decline in the proportion of questions answered on time. This was, for instance, demonstrated by the performance of the Department of Health and Social Care during the 2019–21 Session of the previous Parliament, which our predecessor said “suffered a collapse [...] as it faced the twin challenges of dealing with the pandemic and facing significantly heightened Member interest in its work”.³ That being said, it is by no means a given that an increase in volume naturally leads to a decrease in performance. As noted by our predecessor, if the Department of Health and Social Care were excluded from the results, cross-Government performance during the 2019–21 Session broadly held up to previous performance levels, despite an increase in the volume of questions tabled across the board.⁴
7. It is unlikely that the decrease in the number of questions tabled during the 2023–24 Session signifies a broader trend. Indeed, the Leader of the House told us in oral evidence on 4 December 2024 that the volume of questions tabled since the start of the 2024 Parliament has increased.⁵ To us, this provides clear evidence that Members, old and new, continue to highly value written questions as a means of receiving information from the Government, and it is right that Members should continue to expect timely and high quality responses.
8. We welcome the improvements made to answering performance during the 2023–24 Session, which have led to the strongest overall cross-government performance since before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, we recognise that these improvements coincided with a notable decrease in the volume of written questions tabled for answer during that Session. While it is not possible to determine whether this progress has been achieved as a result of improved resourcing and/or processes within departments, or because departments have managed better with the lower volume of questions tabled, we hope that it is the former. Given the expected increase in the number of written questions in the first Session of the new Parliament, we will continue to monitor whether the improvements to answering performance are sustained in the present Parliament.

3 Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2021–22, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2019–21](#), HC 532, para 4

4 Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2021–22, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2019–21](#), HC 532, para 4

5 Oral evidence taken on 4 December 2024, [Q35](#)

9. In light of the expected increase in the number of written questions tabled this Session relative to the 2023–24 Session, we recommend that Ministers take active steps now to assess the processes and resourcing currently in place within their departments, to ensure that high quality responses can continue to be provided to Members in a timely manner. In particular, Ministers should ensure that their departments are equipped to respond to Named Day questions within the expected timeframe and look to reduce any performance gap between responses to Named Day and Ordinary questions. As part of its response to this report, in order to improve transparency and aid understanding of this matter, we ask the Government to set out the internal processes currently in place for responding to written parliamentary questions, including an indication of current and planned levels of resourcing.

Performance of departments in which poor performance was identified during the 2022–23 Session

10. In its Report on answering performance during the 2022–23 Session, our predecessor committee highlighted five departments in which poor performance was identified between 10 May 2022 and 30 March 2023 (see table below). We have closely examined the performance of these departments during the 2023–24 Session for signs of improvement.

Table 3: Performance of departments in which poor performance was identified during the 2022–23 Session

Department	Performance average across the 2022–23 Session	Performance average across the 2023–24 Session
Home Office	Ordinary: 88%	Ordinary: 91%
	Named Day: 81%	Named Day: 88%
Attorney General’s Office	Ordinary: 72%	Ordinary: 96%
	Named Day: 81%	Named Day: 86%
Department for Education	Ordinary: 81%	Ordinary: 83%
	Named Day: 70%	Named Day: 73%
Department for Health and Social Care	Ordinary: 76%	Ordinary: 85%
	Named Day: 57%	Named Day: 74%

Department	Performance average across the 2022–23 Session	Performance average across the 2023–24 Session
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Ordinary: 69% Named Day: 63%	Ordinary: 60% Named Day: 28%

Source: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

11. We are pleased to note the improved performance of the Home Office (one of the highest volume answering bodies) and the Attorney General’s Office, which both surpassed the 85% standard for Ordinary and Named Day questions in the 2023–24 Session. We urge these departments to sustain their efforts and maintain this high standard moving forward. The Department for Education, however, had improved its performance during the first half of the 2023–24 Session, but its performance then fell in the latter half of the Session. Whilst it improved its performance average from the 2022–23 Session, the Department for Education was still below the 85% standard for both Ordinary and Named Day questions. We therefore hope to see even greater improvements in performance from the Department for Education over the course of this Parliament.
12. During the last Parliament, our predecessor committee repeatedly raised concerns regarding the poor answering performance of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC).⁶ In its Report on the 2022-23 Session, our predecessor committee asked that the then Secretary of State write to them set out what action would be taken to improve this performance.⁷ Owing to the timing of the 2024 General Election, we received a response from the Secretary of State on 12 September 2024, which we published in November 2024 alongside the Government’s response to our predecessor committee’s report.⁸ The Secretary of State set out a number of steps that have been taken which are intended to ensure more timely responses, in particular to Named Day questions. He advised us that:

6 Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2021–22, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2019–21](#), HC 532, paras 4–6, Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2022–23, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2021–22](#), HC 385, paras 8–14 and Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2023–24, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23](#), HC 676, paras 8–11

7 Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2023–24, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23](#), HC 676, para 10

8 Procedure Committee, First Special Report, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23: Government Response to the Committee’s Second Report of Session 2023–24](#), HC 325

- The relevant team is now at full capacity and has run a number of capability sessions on written questions;
- NHS England has introduced a new system to track and monitor Named Day responses; and
- DHSC has put in place an ‘early intervention’ system to enable Named Day questions to be escalated as soon as they fall behind internal deadlines.⁹

Overall, the department showed an improved performance during the 2023–24 Session, answering 85% of Ordinary questions on time (up from 76% in the 2022–23 session) and 74% of Named Day questions on time (up from 57% in the 2022–23 session). However, we have noted that this improvement coincided with a reduction in the average number of written questions tabled per sitting day, from 64.2 questions per day in 2022–23 to 40.4 questions per day in 2023–24. We commend the improvements DHSC achieved during the 2023–24 Session, and urge the department to further build on this to reach the expected standard for Named Day questions.

- 13.** Our predecessor committee also highlighted a reduction in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ (Defra’s) answering performance during the penultimate Session of the previous Parliament. Disappointingly, Defra’s performance fell further still during Session 2023–24. In the first half of the 2023–24 Session, Defra answered just 25% of Named Day questions on time and 50% of Ordinary questions on time. Its performance improved slightly in the latter half of the Session, to 31% and 71% respectively, but this is still far below the 85% standard and far from the standard that we and other Members of this House expect. In light of this concerning level of performance, on 11 December 2024, the Chair of the Committee wrote to the Secretary of State regarding Defra’s performance.¹⁰ In his response, the Secretary of State agreed that the Department’s performance during the 2023–24 Session was “unacceptable”. He advised us that, since the change in Government in July 2024, he has asked his officials to improve the quality of draft responses, issued a guide on Parliamentary Questions, and asked for the clearing process for responses to be streamlined.¹¹

⁹ Procedure Committee, First Special Report, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23: Government Response to the Committee’s Second Report of Session 2023–24](#), HC 325, Appendix 2

¹⁰ [Letter from the Chair of the Procedure Committee to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#), dated 11 December 2024

¹¹ [Letter from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#), dated 7 January 2025

14. We are pleased to see that many of the departments highlighted for poor performance by our predecessor committee have made positive progress during the 2023–24 Session, though we note that this was achieved against a decline in the volume of written questions tabled. We expect those departments to build on the positive progress to date, and to see continued improvements to the timeliness of responses to Named Day questions from the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, which are still below the cross-government 85% standard.

15. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ answering performance during the 2023–24 Session fell far short of what is expected from departments, and gives us serious cause for concern. Such poor response times are discourteous to Members and must not be allowed to persist. We welcome the Secretary of State’s acknowledgment that such performance is unacceptable and note the steps he has taken to improve this, and we will be monitoring performance very closely during this Session and beyond. Where performance falls below the standard that we and other Members of the House expect, Cabinet Ministers should appear before this committee to explain what action they are taking to address these failings.

Performance of departments formed in the 2023 Machinery of Government changes

Table 4: Performance of departments formed in the 2023 Machinery of Government changes

Department	Performance average across the 2022–23 Session	Performance average across the 2023–24 Session
Department of Business and Trade	Ordinary: 84% Named Day: 63%	Ordinary: 93% Named Day: 84%
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Ordinary: 95% Named Day: 91%	Ordinary: 94% Named Day: 88%
Department for Energy Security and Net Zero	Ordinary: 98% Named Day: 95%	Ordinary: 99% Named Day: 99%

Department	Performance average across the 2022–23 Session	Performance average across the 2023–24 Session
Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	Ordinary: 79% Named Day: 66%	Ordinary: 99% Named Day: 93%

Source: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

16. In its report on the 2022–23 session, our predecessor also considered the performance of newly-formed departments in the 2023 Machinery of Government changes. There have been no significant Machinery of Government changes since 2023, including following the 2024 General Election (aside from reverting the name of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government). Following the 2023 changes, our predecessor committee noted that whilst the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) were exceeding the 85% standard, the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) were performing more poorly, and took the view that “unsatisfactory answering performance is not an inevitable outcome for newly established departments, or those departments affected by Machinery of Government changes”.¹² In the 2023–24 Session, DCMS and DESNZ continued to perform strongly, and we are pleased to note that DSIT also exceeded the 85% standard for both Named Day and Ordinary questions in that Session. DBT has also improved its performance and, on average across the Session, it responded to 93% of Ordinary questions and 84% of Named Day questions on time.

17. We agree with our predecessor committee that new departments and those affected by Machinery of Government changes must be equipped to establish a high level of answering performance from the start. The strong performance of all departments formed in the 2023 Machinery of Government change is to be welcomed, and we are keen to see that this can be sustained should the volume of questions tabled to those departments increase in the present Session.

¹² Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2023–24, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23](#), HC 676, para 14

Monitoring performance during the 2024 Parliament

18. As we set out at the beginning of this Report, we intend to continue the important work of our predecessors in monitoring cross-government performance in responding to written parliamentary questions. During our first oral evidence session with the Leader of the House, Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP, we asked about her expectations for Ministers and their departments on responding to written parliamentary questions. The Leader told us that she has written to all Ministers and special advisers to set out that “it is the expectation of the Government that Ministers and Departments will answer [parliamentary questions] in a timely fashion, but a fashion that gives the fullest information available”.¹³ Whilst highlighting the responsibility of departments in providing timely and forthcoming answers, the Leader also noted that there has been a “spike” in the number of written parliamentary questions tabled during this Session and suggested that Members should “perhaps use [written parliamentary questions] a bit more wisely and not in such a repetitive way”.¹⁴
19. Regarding the quality of answers, the Leader referred to the Cabinet Office’s ‘Guide to Parliamentary Work’ (which was improved following recommendations made by our predecessors) and made clear that she has high expectations of all departments in this regard.¹⁵ We were pleased to hear the Leader reiterate to us that Members should not need to submit freedom of information requests in order to receive information from the Government, or be told to wait for forthcoming freedom of information releases.¹⁶ Departments should provide their full response to written parliamentary questions in the first instance, and clearly delineate their processes from responding to questions from Members of Parliament from those relating to responding to freedom of information requests.

13 Oral evidence taken on 4 December 2024, [Q34](#)

14 Oral evidence taken on 4 December 2024, [Q35](#)

15 Procedure Committee, Second Report of Session 2023–24, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23](#), HC 676, para 17 and oral evidence taken on 4 December 2024, [Q37](#)

16 Oral evidence taken on 4 December 2024, [Q39](#)

20. We are pleased to hear that the Leader of the House has taken early steps to underline the importance of written parliamentary questions across Government, and we welcome her high expectations and her commitment to assisting both individual Members and our Committee should instances of poor performance occur. We look forward to working constructively with the Leader, and indeed all Ministers, to uphold the status of written parliamentary questions as a valuable mechanism for transparency and ministerial accountability to Parliament.

21. In its Report on answering performance during the 2022–23 Session, its final Report of the 2019 Parliament, our predecessor committee also highlighted the importance of the content of answers to written questions being of a high quality, and recommended that we, as their successor committee, inquire more fully into the content of responses in this Parliament. We agree with our predecessor committee’s view that timely responses must not come at the expense of detail and thoroughness, and commend them for their work in the previous Parliament to improve both the quality and timeliness of responses to written parliamentary questions. At this early stage in the Parliament, we have focused our analysis on the data available to us on the timeliness of answers. We fully intend, however, to return to the matter of quality of responses to written parliamentary questions in greater depth at a later point in the Parliament, and will set out our plans to do so in due course.

Annex: Timeliness of Answers by Department (Session 2023–24)

All percentages have been rounded to give a whole-number percentage.

Table 5: Departments listed alphabetically

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Attorney General's Office	52	50	96%	43	37	86%
Business and Trade	672	626	93%	343	289	84%
Cabinet Office	364	337	93%	298	277	93%
Culture, Media and Sport	504	475	94%	221	195	88%
Defence	2329	1997	86%	1265	1015	80%
Education	1187	990	83%	527	387	73%
Energy Security and Net Zero	720	715	99%	428	422	99%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1166	704	60%	567	159	28%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	1675	1302	78%	792	579	73%
Government Equalities Office	111	108	97%	31	29	94%

Ordinary written				Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Health and Social Care	2653	2268	85%	1428	1060	74%
Home Office	1342	1226	91%	868	761	88%
Justice	703	604	86%	600	553	92%
Leader of the House of Commons	10	8	80%	12	12	100%
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities*	1020	971	95%	433	407	94%
Northern Ireland Office	58	55	95%	70	65	93%
Prime Minister's Office	4	4	100%	2	2	100%
Science, Innovation and Technology	316	313	99%	290	269	93%
Scotland Office	25	25	100%	29	29	100%
Transport	1063	1049	99%	571	568	99%
Treasury	790	787	100%	440	420	95%
Wales Office	21	21	100%	43	43	100%
Work and Pensions	1040	1027	99%	529	516	98%

Source: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Table 6: Departments ranked by the number of questions for ordinary written answer received

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Health and Social Care	2653	2268	85%	1428	1060	74%
Defence	2329	1997	86%	1265	1015	80%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	1675	1302	78%	792	529	73%
Home	1342	1226	91%	868	761	88%
Education	1187	990	83%	527	387	73%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1166	704	60%	567	159	28%
Transport	1063	1049	99%	571	568	99%
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Ordinary written				Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Northern Ireland Office	58	55	95%	70	65	93%
Attorney General's Office	52	50	96%	43	37	86%
Scotland Office	25	25	100%	29	29	100%
Wales Office	21	21	100%	43	43	100%
Leader of the House of Commons	10	8	80%	12	12	100%
Prime Minister's Office	4	4	100%	2	2	100%

Source: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Table 7: Departments ranked by proportion of questions for ordinary written answer receiving substantive response within five working days

Ordinary written				Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Scotland Office	25	25	100%	29	29	100%
Wales Office	21	21	100%	43	43	100%
Prime Minister's Office	4	4	100%	2	2	100%
Treasury	790	787	100%	440	420	95%
Energy Security and Net Zero	720	715	99%	428	422	99%
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Northern Ireland Office	58	55	95%	70	65	93%
Culture, Media and Sport	504	475	94%	221	195	88%
Business and Trade	672	626	93%	343	289	84%
Cabinet Office	364	337	93%	298	277	93%
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Justice	703	604	86%	600	553	92%
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Leader of the House of Commons	10	8	80%	12	12	100%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	1675	1302	78%	792	579	73%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1166	704	60%	567	159	28%

Source: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Table 8: Departments ranked by number of questions for written answer on a named day received

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Health and Social Care	2653	2268	85%	1428	1060	74%
Defence	2329	1997	86%	1265	1015	80%
Home	1342	1226	91%	868	761	88%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	1675	1302	78%	792	579	73%
Justice	703	604	86%	600	553	92%
Transport	1063	1049	99%	571	568	99%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1166	704	60%	567	159	28%
Work and Pensions	1040	1027	99%	529	516	98%
Education	1187	990	83%	527	387	73%
Treasury	790	787	100%	440	420	95%
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities*	1020	971	95%	433	407	94%
Energy Security and Net Zero	720	715	99%	428	422	99%
Business and Trade	672	626	93%	343	289	84%
Cabinet Office	364	337	93%	298	277	93%
Science, Innovation and Technology	316	313	99%	290	269	93%
Culture, Media and Sport	504	475	94%	221	195	88%
Northern Ireland Office	58	55	95%	70	65	93%

Ordinary written				Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Wales Office	21	21	100%	43	43	100%
Attorney General's Office	52	50	96%	43	37	86%
Government Equalities Office	111	108	97%	31	29	94%
Scotland Office	25	25	100%	29	29	100%
Leader of the House of Commons	10	8	80%	12	12	100%
Prime Minister's Office	4	4	100%	2	2	100%

Source: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Table 9: Departments ranked by proportion of questions for written on a named day answered on the day named

Ordinary written				Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Wales Office	21	21	100%	43	43	100%
Scotland Office	25	25	100%	29	29	100%
Leader of the House of Commons	10	8	80%	12	12	100%
Prime Minister's Office	4	4	100%	2	2	100%
Transport	1063	1049	99%	571	568	99%
Energy Security and Net Zero	720	715	99%	428	422	99%
Work and Pensions	1040	1027	99%	529	516	98%
Treasury	790	787	100%	440	420	95%

Ordinary written				Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities*	1020	971	95%	433	407	94%
Government Equalities Office	111	108	97%	31	29	94%
Cabinet Office	364	337	93%	298	277	93%
Northern Ireland Office	58	55	95%	90	65	93%
Science, Innovation and Technology	316	313	99%	290	269	93%
Justice	703	604	86%	600	553	92%
Culture, Media and Sport	504	475	94%	221	195	88%
Home	1342	1226	91%	868	761	88%
Attorney General's Office	52	50	96%	43	37	86%
Business and Trade	672	626	93%	343	289	84%
Defence	2329	1997	86%	1265	1015	80%
Health and Social Care	2653	2268	85%	1428	1060	74%
Education	1187	990	83%	527	387	73%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	1675	1302	78%	792	579	73%

Ordinary written				Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1166	704	60%	567	159	28%

Source: Data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

* The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was the renamed Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on 10 July 2024.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. We welcome the improvements made to answering performance during the 2023–24 Session, which have led to the strongest overall cross-government performance since before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, we recognise that these improvements coincided with a notable decrease in the volume of written questions tabled for answer during that Session. While it is not possible to determine whether this progress has been achieved as a result of improved resourcing and/or processes within departments, or because departments have managed better with the lower volume of questions tabled, we hope that it is the former. Given the expected increase in the number of written questions in the first Session of the new Parliament, we will continue to monitor whether the improvements to answering performance are sustained in the present Parliament. (Conclusion, Paragraph 8)
2. In light of the expected increase in the number of written questions tabled this Session relative to the 2023–24 Session, we recommend that Ministers take active steps now to assess the processes and resourcing currently in place within their departments, to ensure that high quality responses can continue to be provided to Members in a timely manner. In particular, Ministers should ensure that their departments are equipped to respond to Named Day questions within the expected timeframe and look to reduce any performance gap between responses to Named Day and Ordinary questions. As part of its response to this report, in order to improve transparency and aid understanding of this matter, we ask the Government to set out the internal processes currently in place for responding to written parliamentary questions, including an indication of current and planned levels of resourcing. (Recommendation, Paragraph 9)
3. We are pleased to see that many of the departments highlighted for poor performance by our predecessor committee have made positive progress during the 2023–24 Session, though we note that this was achieved against a decline in the volume of written questions tabled. We expect those departments to build on the positive progress to date, and to see continued improvements to the timeliness of responses to Named Day questions from

the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, which are still below the cross-government 85% standard. (Conclusion, Paragraph 14)

4. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' answering performance during the 2023–24 Session fell far short of what is expected from departments, and gives us serious cause for concern. Such poor response times are discourteous to Members and must not be allowed to persist. We welcome the Secretary of State's acknowledgment that such performance is unacceptable and note the steps he has taken to improve this, and we will be monitoring performance very closely during this Session and beyond. Where performance falls below the standard that we and other Members of the House expect, Cabinet Ministers should appear before this committee to explain what action they are taking to address these failings (Conclusion, Paragraph 15)
5. We agree with our predecessor committee that new departments and those affected by Machinery of Government changes must be equipped to establish a high level of answering performance from the start. The strong performance of all departments formed in the 2023 Machinery of Government change is to be welcomed, and we are keen to see that this can be sustained should the volume of questions tabled to those departments increase in the present Session. (Conclusion, Paragraph 17)
6. We are pleased to hear that the Leader of the House has taken early steps to underline the importance of written parliamentary questions across Government, and we welcome her high expectations and her commitment to assisting both individual Members and our Committee should instances of poor performance occur. We look forward to working constructively with the Leader, and indeed all Ministers, to uphold the status of written parliamentary questions as a valuable mechanism for transparency and ministerial accountability to Parliament. (Conclusion, Paragraph 20)
7. In its Report on answering performance during the 2022–23 Session, its final Report of the 2019 Parliament, our predecessor committee also highlighted the importance of the content of answers to written questions being of a high quality, and recommended that we, as their successor committee, inquire more fully into the content of responses in this Parliament. We agree with our predecessor committee's view that timely responses must not come at the expense of detail and thoroughness, and commend them for their work in the previous Parliament to improve both the quality and timeliness of responses to written parliamentary questions. At this early stage in the Parliament, we have focused our analysis on the data available to us on the timeliness of answers. We fully intend, however, to return to the matter of

quality of responses to written parliamentary questions in greater depth at a later point in the Parliament, and will set out our plans to do so in due course. (Conclusion, Paragraph 21)

Formal Minutes

Wednesday 8 January 2025

Members present

Cat Smith, in the Chair

James Asser

Bambos Charalambous

Mr Lee Dillon

Graeme Downie

Mary Kelly Foy

Gill Furniss

Tracy Gilbert

Richard Holden

Gurinder Singh Josan

Frank McNally

Joy Morrissey

Lee Pitcher

Michael Wheeler

Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental Performance in Session 2023–24

Draft Report (*Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental Performance in Session 2023–24*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 21 read and agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Wednesday 22 January at 2.30 pm.

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2024–25

Number	Title	Reference
1st Special	Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022–23: Government responses	HC 325